

# Sadly missed: a key contributor to science policy

IT IS not just those of us that had the good fortune to serve on the Select Committee on Science and Technology who regret its demise. There must be many others outside the House of Commons who recognise the valuable contribution which it made to a wider understanding within Parliament of certain aspects of science and technology and to the quality of some government decision-making.

Since its establishment in January 1967, the Select Committee investigated a wide spectrum of subjects, ranging from nuclear power to coastal pollution and from carbon fibres to computers. It was chaired and guided by two distinguished politicians, Arthur Palmer from 1967-70 and again from 1974-79 and the late Airey Neave from 1970-74. There was also a sensible degree of continuity in its relatively small but enthusiastic membership.

It is hard to say exactly how much influence was wielded by the committee, because government departments are not in the habit of revealing to the public the various stages of their decision-making procedures and in our constituency ministers claim sole responsibility for the decisions which are actually taken. However, the record shows that the committee's 1969 report on the UK nuclear power industry which proposed the establishment of an Atomic Energy Board, was eventually followed by the Atomic Energy Authority Act 1971; that the 1971 report on population policy which called for the establishment in government of a special population office, was followed by the creation of the Population Panel; and that the 1974 report on energy conservation was eventually followed in December 1977 by a substantial, if belated, package of energy conservation measures which included some of the recommendations made by the committee.

In other cases, although the government of the day initially reacted in a defensive, even hostile, way to some of the committee's recommendations, subsequent events proved them right or led



**Nigel Forman MP** mourns the passing of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology

government to reconsider its earlier policy response. One example is provided by the way in which the last government's initially negative response to the committee's advocacy of alternative sources of energy in its 1977 report was eventually transformed into a more positive view of the need at least to explore the technical possibilities in this area and to do so with the support of adequate R&D funding. Another example is the way in which the Departments of Environment and Transport eventually came to accept the need for the Planning and Transport Research Advisory Committee to include in its terms of reference and its annual report a specific account of R&D work on advanced ground transport, something which had been rejected by government in its initial response of August 1974.

As for the work in progress at the time of the committee's demise, it is impossible to tell yet whether or not the uncompleted investigations into recombinant DNA research and developments in small passenger car engine technology will be pursued by the relevant "departmental" Select Committees which are to take its place. With any luck this will happen and a great deal of useful evidence will not have been wasted. Both these investigations exemplify the tendency of the Committee latterly to balance its work on short-term subjects — such as filament and discharge lamps or the lessons of the Eleni V disaster — with more important long-term work on emerging technologies for the future which may have significant benefits and costs for our society in the 1980s and beyond.

Now that the committee is no longer in

existence, it is possible to form a clearer assessment of just what will be missed by Parliament, the press and the general public. Members of the House of Commons will miss the opportunities which the committee provided for consideration of important scientific and technological issues which by dint of their scope and complexity, are bound to transcend departmental boundaries. Recombinant DNA research and the wide-ranging implications of innovation, R&D in Japanese science-based industry are two typical and important examples.

Journalists will miss the platform which the committee provided for the public airing of important questions which are not otherwise debated with any frequency or in any depth in the normal proceedings of Parliament, whether in the Chamber or in legislative Standing Committees. The general public will be deprived of a useful Parliamentary mechanism for encouraging at least some of their elected representatives to look beyond the inevitably short-term horizons of contemporary politics. This last consequence is perhaps the most severe blow, since it is now more important than ever to preserve and, if necessary, create institutional mechanisms which allow arguments about social time preference and encourage the broadest possible cost-benefit analysis to be undertaken across the whole spectrum of contemporary science and technology.

Of course, in many ways the influence of the committee will live on through its *alumni*, like Neil Macfarlane, the junior minister with responsibility for science, who now find themselves in influential positions in government, and through its example in seeking to tackle a wide range of scientific and technological issues which will not go away just because it no longer exists. Furthermore, it is not as if there are not other laudable institutions of these issues. There is the well-established Parliamentary and Scientific Committee which has played a valuable role since its inception soon after the Second World War. There is also the Council for Science and Society which deserves to find continued support for the useful work which it does in attempting to bring scientists and laymen into a state of greater mutual understanding.

However, the fact remains that the peculiar dual role of the Select Committee as an educator of Members of Parliament and an investigator of issues which would not otherwise be the subject of Parliamentary scrutiny, will be difficult to ascribe to any one of the "departmental" Select Committees within the new system recently endorsed by the House of Commons. It must, therefore, become an important objective of those concerned with these matters in the new Parliament to meet this requirement by other means. □

## Select committee considers GMAG

THE final report of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, released last week, is the result of the committee's recent investigations into the "public safety and public policy" issues of recombinant DNA.

In a brief summing-up of the evidence taken, the report expresses concern at the way in which the Genetic Manipulation Advisory Group handles notifications of industry's intentions to work with recombinant DNA. Under present arrangements, members of GMAG with potential industrial interests and those who have not signed a confidentiality agreement, withdraw from discussion of

notifications by industry. The Select Committee disapproves that an advisory body "set up to safeguard both workers and the general public, should have apparently first and second class members". The report also expresses "surprise" that the Department of Education and Science (DES), not the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) is responsible for GMAG. It is concerned that the strong position of UK researchers and companies should not be hampered by unnecessary regulation. International safety standards also "appear to be desirable", it says.